



THE BELARUSIAN  
ASSOCIATION  
OF JOURNALISTS

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# MASS MEDIA IN BELARUS

E-NEWSLETTER

**2013**

## Summary Analytical Review



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## MEDIA LANDSCAPE OF BELARUS – 2013

According to the Ministry of information of the Republic of Belarus, as of 1 January 2014 there were 1, 556 printed mass media registered in Belarus (712 newspapers, 793 magazines, 35 newsletters, 11 catalogues, and 2 yearbooks). Public officials often stress that only 410 of them are state-owned.



However, the overwhelming majority of non-state print media are of a purely entertainment, advertising, or similar nature. According to the Belarusian Association of Journalists, the number of officially registered non-state news outlets is less than 30. Almost half of them were kicked out of the state retail and subscription media distribution networks as early as in 2005, in the run up to the presidential elections of 2006, and are still fighting to get back. Many of them (especially the national ones) experience difficulties with advertising. The daily circulation of Sovetskaya Belorussia newspaper sponsored by the President's Administration is twice as high as the total weekly circulation of the independent press (the majority of non-state papers are published once a week). Other state-owned printed outlets with the circulations comparable to those of the independent press are lined up into a strict ideological vertical.

We have not seen any new successful news projects enter the market – although in 2013 the Ministry of Information registered 88 printed outlets. There are only 26 newspapers among them, while the majority of the outlets registered in 2013 are commercial magazines. During the same period the Ministry withdrew registration certificates from 13 printed outlets (including 5 newspapers).

**In Belarus, mass media, including the printed ones, are registered by an agency of state administration (the Ministry of Information) under an authorization-based procedure. According to minister of information Aleh Pralaskouski, in 2010-2012 the Ministry sent 105 denials of registration to mass media founders.**

The situation with television and broadcasting media in Belarus is even further away from the democratic standards. As of early 2014, out of 262 registered radio and television programs (including 169 radio programs), the overwhelming majority (178) is state-owned (among them 144 radio and 34 TV programs). However, the other 84 non-state electronic mass media are under full control of the authorities due to the system of licensing (or “registration”) of broadcasting.



In 2013, 3 new radio programs, and 4 new TV programs were registered. Almost half of them (3) are state-owned.

Besides that, there are 9 news agencies registered in the country, 7 of which are formally non-state.

Independent mass media experience economic and legal discrimination, while the state-sponsored media enjoy administrative preferences and direct funding from the state budget. In 2013 the government allocated 60 million Euro to support the state-sponsored mass media, distributing the funds on a non-competitive basis. The National State TV and Radio Company, as well as the state-owned TV channels STV (Stolichnoye Televideniye) and ONT (Vtoroy Natsionalny Kanal) were again exempted from value-added and profits taxes.

**Internet remains the freest sector** of the media scene in Belarus. Over 4.85 million Belarusians aged 15 and above use Internet (which is 12% more than a year ago); about 80% of them do it every day. However the freedom of activity in the BY-net is being gradually restricted by both legal and non-legal means.





## MASS MEDIA SITUATION DEVELOPMENT IN 2013 (Review)

In 2013 the situation with mass media was in the state of stagnation, remaining extremely unfavorable for the freedom of expression.

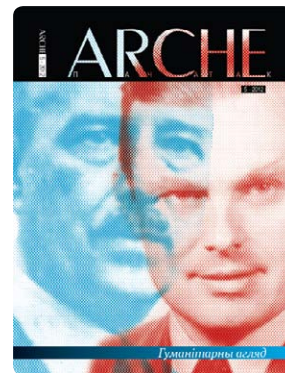
The main positive events in the media sphere took place early in the year. Criminal charges against journalists Andrei Poczobut and Anton Surapin were dropped. Also, it was decided not to instigate criminal proceedings against the staff of the magazine "Arche. The Beginning". The conflicts were in the focus of attention of the international community and their resolution could be indicative of the official Minsk' attempts to unfreeze the relations with the European Union after the post-election crisis in 2010-2012.



Hrodna correspondent of the Polish Gazeta Wyborcza Andrzej Poczobut was charged under Article 367, part 2 of the Criminal Code (defamation of the President of Belarus, committed by a person previously convicted for defamation). He was detained on June 21, 2012 and taken into custody, while his apartment was searched. On June 30 the journalist was released under the written pledge not to leave country. The situation was complicated by the fact that in summer 2011 Poczobut was already found guilty of defamation of the president and sentenced to three years of imprisonment with suspension for two years. Any guilty verdict in the new case would immediately mean 3 years in jail for the journalist under the previous case. However, on March 15 the Board of the Investigation Committee for Hrodna oblast dismissed the charges against the journalist, having found no objective proofs to the alleged crime.

A week after the charges against Poczobut were dropped, on March 22, 2013 the editorial office of "Arche" magazine found out, after examination of its activity the prosecutor decided not to instigate criminal proceedings against the magazine staff. The prob-

lems began, when on September 14, 2012 Hrodna police and tax inspectors detained Valery Bulhakau, chief editor of "Arche", during the presentation of the book "Sovetization of Western Belarus" by Y. Shumski. Valery Bulhakau was accused of illegal entrepreneurial activity. The financial investigation agencies began a large-scale examination of the editorial office activity and blocked the account of the magazine. Simultaneously, the state TV channel broadcast a show where the anchor claimed the "literature case" could grow into a criminal one because of the extremist content of the books seized from the editor. Under threat of criminal prosecution Valery Bulhakau left Belarus. He returned to the country when the investigation bodies announced they would not start criminal proceedings against the editor and the staff of the magazine.



In June 2013 the KGB officially announced that the criminal charges against A. Surapin had been dropped. Anton Surapin, 20, a student of Journalism at the Belarusian State University was charged with complicity in illegal crossing of the state border of Belarus by an organized group. Anton happened to be the first to upload and publish on his website photos of teddy bears, dropped from a small Swedish airplane that crossed illegally the Belarusian-Lithuanian state border on July 4, 2012. The journalist was detained and locked in KGB pre-trial detention center where he spent more than a month. Surapin was released from custody in August 2012. However, he was under prosecution until the charges were dropped in June 2013. The arrest of Anton Surapin by KGB led the top-ten list of the most absurd arrests of 2012, published by Amnesty International.

However, the positive steps were not followed by systemic changes in mass media sphere. On the contrary, measures of repressive nature were taken against mass media and journalists.

Numerous times police detained journalists during exercise of profession, while prosecutors and KGB warned freelancers for working with the foreign mass media. During the 12 months period Belarusian Association of Journalists registered over 50 cases of detention of journalists, 4 of which led to administra-

tive arrests of 3 to 12 days, and at least 10 cases of official warnings issued to journalists.

The authorities intensified efforts in using the counter-extremism legislation for suppressing the freedom of expression. In April, at request of the Hrodna regional KGB, a court branded “Belarus Press Photo 2011” book “extremist”. Referring to that judicial decision, in September the Ministry of Information withdrew a license from “Lohvinau” publishing house, one of the flagships of independent book industry in Belarus. By the end of the year there were a few more attempts reported to recognize book products “extremist materials”.



**“Belarus Press Photo 2011” was published as an outcome of an annual independent contest of press photo in Belarus, carried out since 2010. Famous photographers from different countries of the world are members of the jury in the contest. A photo album with winning photos was printed in 2012 and was freely sold in the country. The pictures from the album (the winners of the contest) were published in Belarusian periodicals and streams of news agencies without any negative consequences.**

In 2013 bloggers and other online activists continued to be the subject to administrative and criminal prosecution. Independent Internet resources occasionally experienced blocking, hacker attacks, etc. Several information resources are listed by the government as web-sites with restricted access from governmental institutions, education and culture establishments, etc.

In the end of 2013 the deputy minister of information spoke about preparation of amendments to the law on mass media meant to expand its measures (up to withdrawal of registration) to “most popular and influential on-line resources”. That statement provoked negative reaction of the journalists’ and the Internet community.

Belarusian and international organizations and structures repeatedly called on the authorities to bring the

Belarusian mass media legislation in compliance with the democratic standards. However, the legal steps made by Belarus in 2013 do not speak of possible democratization of mass media sphere in the country. On the contrary: they reflect the intention of the government to increase control over the freedom of expression even beyond the sphere of traditional mass media – in the Internet and in the book sector. For instance, in July 2013 the new law “On Publishing in the Republic of Belarus” took legal effect. The law entitles the Ministry of Information to register book publishers, publishing houses, as well as book distributors.



## RANKINGS, INDEXES

The human rights organization Freedom House once again [has rated Belarus](#) among the group of [countries with not free Internet](#).

The Freedom House report on Internet freedom in 2013 includes 60 countries. 29 of them blocked or filtered in the Internet information of political and social nature. Belarus is the only country in Europe where freedom of the Internet is limited. The situation in our country, according to human rights advocates from the Freedom House, can be compared with China, Sudan, and Ethiopia.



In its other “Freedom of Press 2012” report, published on the eve of the World Press Freedom Day 3 May 2013, Belarus was ranked among eight “worst of the worst” countries, where “independent media are either nonexistent or barely able to operate, the press acts as a mouthpiece for the regime, citizens’ access to unbiased information is severely limited, and dissent is crushed through imprisonment, torture, and other forms of repression.” In the Freedom House ranking, Belarus takes the 193rd place out of 197, and stands next to Equatorial Guinea,



Eritrea, Iran, Cuba, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and North Korea. Belarus scored 93 in a scale where “0” is the best, and “100” is the worst situation. [Link 1](#), [Link 2](#).

In 2013 Belarus remained on the last on the level of media freedom in the countries of Eastern Partnership. [This is reflected in the results](#) of the three quarterly researches of the Media Freedom Index in the EaP countries.

**The study is carried out within the framework of ENP project “EaP Media Freedom Watch” on the basis of interviews with 10 media experts in each of the six countries of the Eastern Partnership: Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. It measures the level of the ability of the media and journalists to exercise their rights and freedoms in the countries of the region.**

In the traditional [World Press Freedom Index](#) published by Reporters without Borders in the beginning of 2014, Belarus, just as last year, ranked 157th out of 180. Among the former USSR countries ranking below Belarus, there is not only Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, but also Azerbaijan (160), which ranked 156 one year ago.

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Publisher: Belarussian Association of Journalists (BAJ)

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